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New Material World: Rethreading Technology

Sharon L. Kennedy

Curator of Cultural and Civic Engagement at Sheldon Museum of Art

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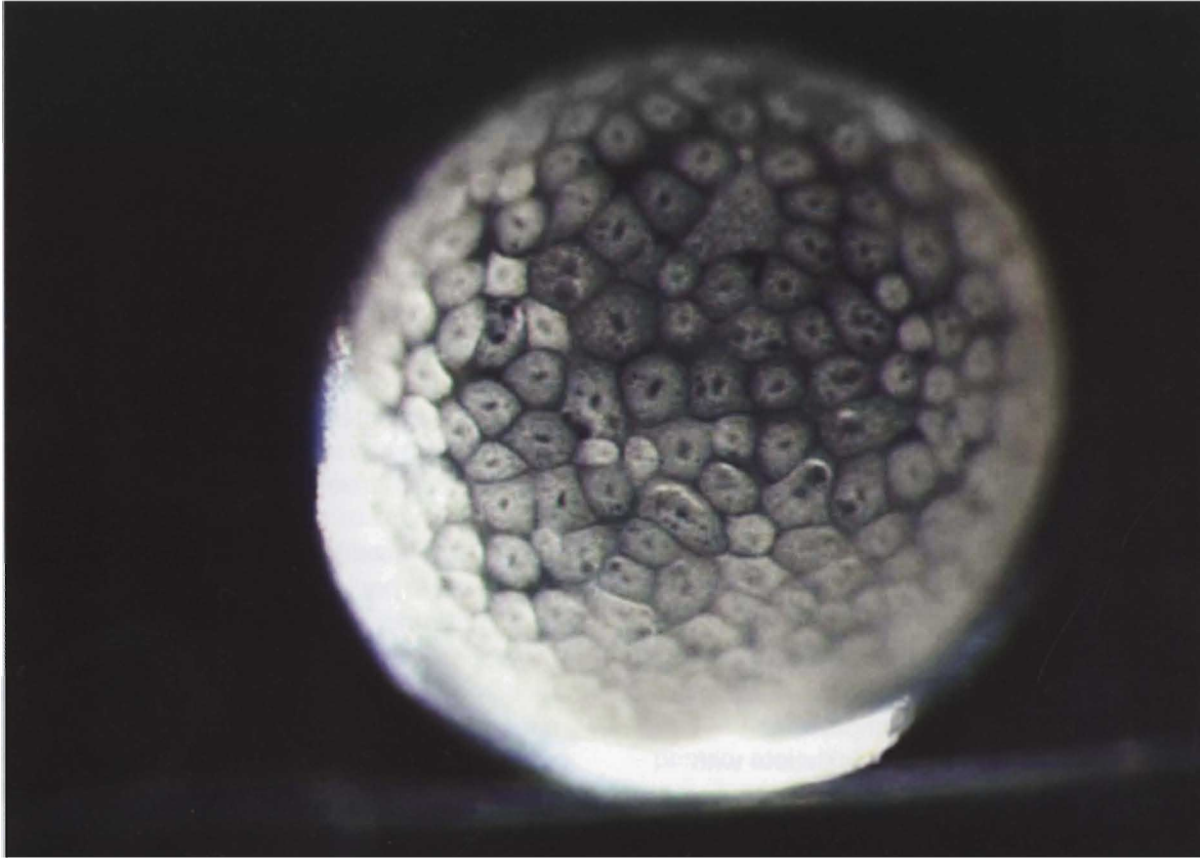
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new material world

rethreading technology



New Material World: Rethreading Technology highlights ten contemporary textile artists from Canada, Denmark, Japan, South Korea, and the United States, who engage modern technology either by employing or studiously resisting it in their work. The exhibition explores ways in which some artists utilize technology as a tool to expand their design capabilities and others use it to further their cultural, political, scientific, or social interests. Technology aids in planning and implementing artwork, allowing artists more time to explore new creative ventures. Modern exchanges of information facilitate collaborations between artists and industry. Although technology has benefited many textile artists, others find new meaning in the materials they choose. The use of non-traditional mediums such as combs, stainless steel, paper, and wood have led to innovative new designs.

Some artists use technology as a means to production and design, and others consider their choice and use of material inherently antithetical to technological advancement.

This tension between handcrafting and modern machinery has historical precedents, perhaps most famously in the Art and Crafts movement of the mid-to-late 19th century. During this period in Great Britain, designer William Morris and art critic John Ruskin opposed industrialization and its perceived ills—the alienation of the worker and shoddy mass-production—and envisioned a utopian society of communal laborers dedicated to handcrafting. According to artist Jessica Smith, with today's digital capabilities, we are at similar crossroads.¹

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Smith's work invites the viewer to consider the connection between innovation and tradition. She uses chemically enhanced pigments and industrial woven cloth to articulate historical textile patterns. Her installations combine hand-printed wall coverings and Jacquard-woven upholstery with digitally-printed ceramics. For *New Material World*, Smith has recreated a 19th-century domestic interior. Here, she draws from 17th-century fabrics that were woven in England and France, but visually inspired by Asian imports such as Chinese porcelains, Indian textiles, and Japanese lacquers. Domestic textiles such as these have communicated both actual and aspiring social status, as well as gender and ethnicity throughout history. Tying the handcrafting versus technology debate with taste and class, Smith is interested in how textiles can transcend historical boundaries.

Artist Cat Mazza also investigates the tension between handcrafted textiles and modern methods. Like Smith, Mazza is interested in historical and cross-cultural aspects of textile production. However, where Smith explores the position of craft and labor within the context of digital technology, Mazza's work investigates the textile mills and sweatshops of early industrial capitalism, and their relationship to the current labor crisis in the global garment industry.

Mazza explores not only how mechanization changed the labor process itself, but textile production as well. She uses technology to revitalize pre-industrial craft, specifically crochet, cross-stitch, knitting, and needlepoint. In 2004 Mazza launched a free web-based program, *knitPro*, to translate digital images into textile grid patterns that can be personalized and printed. Through her efforts, Mazza contrasts the labor conditions of manufacturing to the pleasure of hobbyist craft, evidenced in her anti-sweatshop initiative,

Nike Blanket from 2003. In protest of Nike's use of sweatshop labor in developing areas, participants from 30 different countries and every state in the United States hand-crocheted squares to create a collaborative blanket. "I am interested in the political potential of craft," Mazza has stated, "and use it as an avenue to discuss social issues."²

Like Mazza, Geraldine Ondrizek incorporates new media within her work. For example, she makes visible the simplest form of life—the egg and its process of development—then transfers its image onto cloth, rendering it physical. Biological and physiological in nature, Ondrizek's work resonates for her on a personal and political level. After the loss of her mother to cancer and the subsequent loss of her first child, Ondrizek delved into the area of genetics, exploring subjects such as RNA, DNA, and genetic testing, as they relates to ethnic identity and disease.

Ondrizek's film *Cellular* projects onto a semi-translucent screen a multiple cell embryo, called a "blastocyst." Each segment of the film is a result of more than 200 hours of still images. The blastocyst stage is the most important growth period in development. If it is disrupted, the organism becomes permanently damaged. Ondrizek edited the raw films, overlapping and repeating the phases of maturation. Her approach of mimicking the process of cell division is seen as a gesture of humanity's endless potential. According to the artist, watching a continuous loop of an egg developing and cells dividing is meditative: "It looks like we are witnessing the beginning of the earth's formation or plate tectonics."³

Although Janice Lessman-Moss's work is not scientifically based, her art has been critically described (in terms similar to Ondrizek's) as possessing "an



work, she states, “the fabrics...do not stand solidly cleaving the air. They have their source in textiles, which have their own language—fluttering above the floor, breathing and melting into the air.”¹³

Understanding nature’s rhythm is also important to South Korean-born Kyoung Ae Cho. Her training began with her grandmother who taught her to sew and to collect from nature. In works such as *Reconfiguration*, Cho incorporates recycled and undervalued materials. In the process of gathering, she studies nature through its language of color, scale, shape or texture. She also borrows patterns from the natural world, attributing the linear forms of her work to her visual and sensual conversations with nature.

Cho’s work reconstructs the materials she finds into another level of existence. In this way she traces their history and makes new markings and shapes. She argues that “nature records both its past evolutions and its insights into the future.”¹⁴ Cho embeds four such insights in her work: change, time, essence and rebirth.

The elements of the natural world in her work offer a profound metaphor for the vagaries of nature itself: change, renewal, and yet stability. Cho believes that if we understand nature we can fully understand ourselves and our place in the world. She considers her work low tech and prefers to use her hands in every step of construction. Technology, used as a planning tool is limited to digital sketching and drawing. Through her break with technology Cho attempts to emphasize beauty and the strength of nature.

Sonya Clark is a first-generation American whose parents emigrated from the Caribbean. She creates conceptual work with compelling materials to encompass art from African and the African Diaspora. A

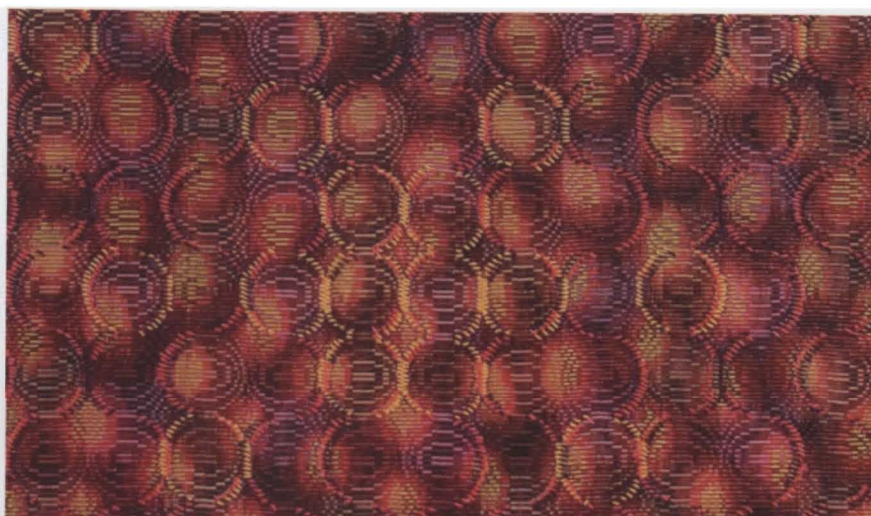
theme running through Clark’s work is a spiritual respect for *Ashé*, the Yoruba concept of divine life force. Since 2005 Clark has worked with combs for its multiple meanings, such as hairstyling, what constitutes beauty, expressions of cultural heritage, gender politics, and racial identity.

In Clark’s *Plain Weave*, hair combs replace threads that cross over and under each other to create a strong woven product. Clark adopted this medium because, in her words, “hairdressing is the primordial fiber art since hair is the first fiber we as humans arranged with a sense of aesthetics and function... The comb in all of its versions (from hair comb to reed on a loom) is the primary tool used to order fibers.”¹⁵

Clark also configures combs into relevant portraits that address the same themes, as in her portrait of *Madam CJ Walker*, one of 20th century’s most successful African American entrepreneurs who made her fortune through hair care products. Clark is interested in hair’s relevance to race politics. The comb orders appearance and provides information about culture and our notion of aesthetics, civilized behavior, and hygiene. If left unruly, for example, certain assumptions are made. Through the use of fine-toothed combs, Clark’s work slyly connotes white, hegemonic culture and its rigid standards of beauty, implying the type of hair that would easily pass through such a device.

For some artists, technology speeds up the process of art making and allows them to add new complexities to

LEFT: TOMOKO ISHIDA, *CALMNESS*, 2010, PAPER. CENTER: KYOKO KUMAI, *SEN MAN NA YU TA*, 2007, STAINLESS STEEL FILA-MENTS. RIGHT: KYOUNG AE CHO, *REMAINS VIII-I*, 2009, LEAF, SILK ORGANZA, THREAD, HAND-STITCHING. ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.



organic, throbbing, energy of growth, movement and change.”⁴ According to the artist, “the virtual represents the physical; and my knowledge of weave structures and materials combined with the generative capabilities of the computer as a tool, influence all of my decisions.”⁵ Even so, Lessman-Moss’s work does not appear digitally produced, and her overall approach remains intuitive. She uses two layers of warp composed of yarns for different weights and materials that have been painted with dye before being threaded on the loom.

The colorful weavings of painterly circles and smaller geometric networks in *New Material World* are made manifest by the mechanism of the Jacquard loom. By incorporating the motif of a circle within a square, Lessman-Moss allows her weavings to explore the interchange between fluidity and stability. A larger series of circles appears on the surface and provides a tactile linear movement, as well as patterns consisting of “a complex interplay of abstract, decorative or referential systems.”⁶ Lessman-Moss’s weavings combine visual and tactile characteristics rooted both in historic processes and current technologies.

Danish artist Grethe Sørensen sees her work as a fascination with “constructing matter...in which the material, the structure and the weaving techniques are necessary and indispensable parts of the matter.”⁷ Her years of experimentation in what she calls “unsystematic weave constructions” have become for her new expressions of nature.

Sørensen relies on digital tools to build bridges that allow her to express herself in other media. In the “Millions of Colours” series, begun in 2009, Sørensen explores the ways in which “millions of colours can be made by mixing eight basic colours.”⁸ She works with the smallest part

of the digital image—the pixel—and enlarges, stretches, and manipulates it in numerous ways. By enlarging the hardedge pixels, the artist’s work achieves a blurred fluidity that has become her signature style.

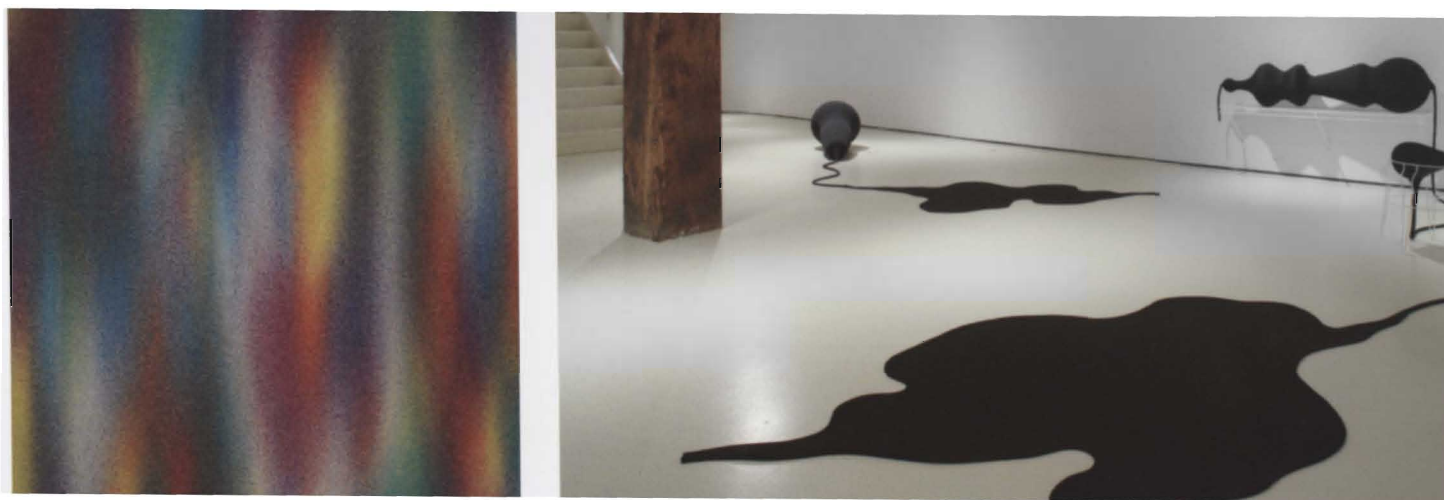
Sørensen’s work is still rooted in woven textiles but the combination of computer efficiency with handcrafting enriches both. She is able to produce more work with the help of computers and Jacquard looms than without them, which in turn allows her more time for the creative process. However, as helpful as computer programs may be, they can never replace the sensuousness of handcrafted design, according to Sørensen.

Handcrafting also figures largely into Canadian artist Lyn Carter’s work, but “digital technology is creeping up to the forefront.”⁹ For the last ten years, Carter’s sewn works depended on a slow, mathematical plotting to create her patterned pieces. More recently, the artist has explored 3-D imaging software in order to supplement her drawing practice and speed up the pattern-making process.

Carter’s *Drawn through Black* is made up of a series of large-scale sculptural forms that animate their surrounding space. Although abstract as a group,

COVER: GERALDINE ONDRIZEK, *CELLULAR*, 2008, SILK PAINTING, INK JET PHOTOS. PAGE TWO: CAT MAZZA, *NIKE BLANKET PETITION*, 2003-2008, YARN. PAGE THREE: LEFT: JESSICA SMITH, *BIZARRE DEAD SQUIRREL*, 2010, EGYPTIAN COTTON WARP, RAYON WEFT BROCADE. PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLIE RIBBENS PHOTOGRAPHY, 2010.

RIGHT: JANICE LESSMAN-MOSS, *ONLY PASSING THROUGH*, 2007, LINEN, RAYON, NYLON, PAINT. PAGE FOUR: LEFT: GRETHE SØRENSEN, *MILLIONS OF COLORS NO. 6*, 2009, DIGITAL JACQUARD WEAVING. RIGHT: LYN CARTER, *DRAWN THROUGH BLACK*, 2009, FABRIC, STYROFOAM AND WIRE FRAME FORMS. ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.



the scale of the individual forms suggests diverse yet identifiable objects, from banisters to body parts, human figures to large chess pieces to phalluses. Yet, their tailored, skin-like textile covering complicates our initial reading of the work. Skin and clothing represent the boundary between exterior and interior for Carter. These binary opposites allow the artist to negotiate tensions, the familiar and unfamiliar, or the individual and her surroundings. According to Carter, the “interior and exterior are held in balance. By using images that are doubled or appear to be two things at once I seek to elude a fixed state.”¹⁰ The large-scale forms dressed in dark clothing engage with the white walls and travertine floor of Sheldon’s gallery space and further stretch the physical parameters of the textile world.

Tomoko ISHIDA and Kyoko Kumai follow the Japanese tradition of retaining a strong identity with their subject and of demonstrating a continuity of concern for nature while developing bold new forms of expression. They possess a strong understanding of materials that derives from their country’s rich textile history. Additionally both artists are responding to technology’s by-products by recycling or transforming modern materials into unique art forms.

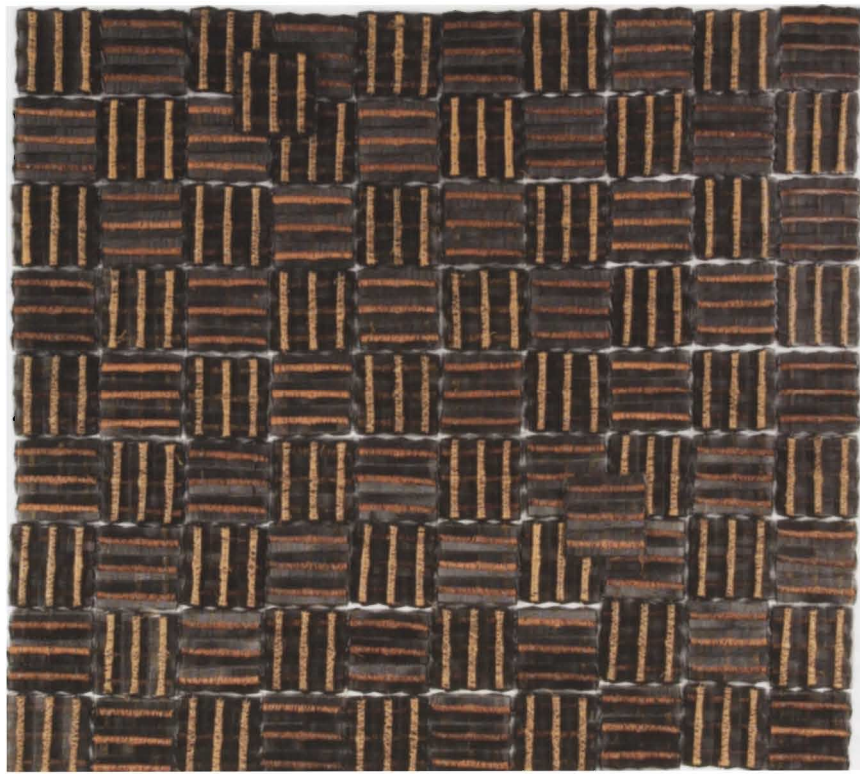
Married to a Buddhist priest, ISHIDA spends much of her time in a Zen temple in northeastern Japan performing both domestic and liturgical duties. Although this lifestyle was at first disruptive to her art making, ISHIDA eventually began to feel a connection with the people and objects that came across her path. Visitors to the temple would leave behind paper wrappings, such as those that held offerings made to Buddha, and ISHIDA was drawn to their color and texture. She thus made papers that have been twisted and flattened—known as *Koyori*—her preferred medium. Because the papers symbolize the interactions she has had with

others, ISHIDA considers them the embodiment of herself and humankind. For her, as for many Japanese artists, however, the creative process is not seen as a form of self-expression but rather as the development or construction of identity.

ISHIDA makes clear her aversion to technology when she states, “I want my hand not to use special skill or technology but to repeat simple movement.”¹¹ In *Co-Twisted*, the title of Sheldon’s site-specific piece, the artist created an artwork with a decidedly organic shape and volume. The work’s suspended fragments of paper are made from found detritus. In this process, she encourages recycling.

Like ISHIDA, Kumai is more concerned with materials than technology. According to Kumai, “materials bear techniques, techniques rouse images, and the roused images bear further techniques and materials.”¹² Kumai was trained as a weaver but has been working with stainless steel for more than 20 years, creating tension between natural and manmade worlds. Inspired by natural phenomena such as the movement of wind in the grass, Kumai shapes her steelworks to embody motion and weightlessness. To create these effects, the artist uses interlacing and knotting techniques. Thus, light and shadow move freely between the intervals of the weave, and line creates the internal structure expressing both rhythmic movement and rest.

For *Sound of Water*, in the exhibition, Kumai uses stainless steel filaments that were randomly placed on the floor and woven using a shuttle or needle. The piece resembles a cascade of water or other flowing material. By contrast, her work *Sen Man Na Yu Ta*, appears more substantive, from a distance, yet quite porous seen up close. Kumai attempts to connect organic with inorganic material in her process of weaving. In describing her



their work. Technology provides more time for the artist to experiment and conduct research, allowing them greater ease in actualizing their thoughts. For others, material becomes the essence of their work; they resist technology or transform its products through recycling and manipulation. Each of the artists in this survey use new material or manipulate old material in new ways. Their innovations and resistance to new technologies is founding new material worlds.

Sharon L. Kennedy
Curator of Cultural and Civic Engagement

1. Sharon Kennedy, email exchange with Jessica Smith, May 16, 2010.
2. Kennedy, email exchange with Cat Mazza, June 1, 2010.
3. Kennedy, email exchange with Geraldine Ondrizek, June 18, 2010.
4. Bhakti Ziek, "Origin and Synthesis: Selected Weavings 1994-2004," Kent State University exhibition brochure, 2004.
5. Kennedy, email exchange with Janice Lessman-Moss, May 17, 2010.
6. Ibid.
7. Artist Statement: www.browngrotta.com/pages/sorensen.html
8. Kennedy, email exchange with Grethe Sørensen, May 14, 2010.
9. Kennedy, email exchange with Lyn Carter, April 27, 2010.
10. www.tomthomson.org/exhibition_archive.php?ExhibitionID=91
11. Kennedy, email exchange with Tomoko ISHIDA, June 4, 2010.
12. Lesley Millar, "Textural Space: Contemporary Japanese Textile Art," catalogue, 2001 p. 3. The Surrey Institute of Art and Design University College, 2001.
13. Artist Statement: browngrotta.com/pages/kumai.php
14. Matthew Koumis, *Art Textiles of the World: USA* (Telos Art Publishing:Winchester, 2000) p. 43.
15. Kennedy, email exchange with Sonya Clark, March 28, 2010.

SONYA CLARK, *PLAIN WEAVE*, 2008, COMBS, THREAD.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.